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ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 260335Z NOV 07
FM AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1402
INFO RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 3324
RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 2334
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 2249
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 2308
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 2020
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DUSHANBE 001688

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DEPT FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/26/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [TI](#)

SUBJECT: HIP HIP HURRAH FOR PRESIDENT RAHMON

CLASSIFIED BY: Tom Hushek, Deputy Chief of Mission, U.S. Embassy
Dushanbe, STATE.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) Recent events -- the celebrations of the sixteenth anniversary of President's Rahmon's election as Chairman of the Supreme Council of Tajikistan, and a World Cup Soccer match against Singapore -- highlighted the nascent cult of personality springing up around President Rahmon. Publicity for these events emphasized that Tajikistan's modern history starts with Rahmon's assumption of leadership; not with the republic's independence from the Soviet Union. End Summary.

Khujand Celebrations - Rahmonistan
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12. (C) This year the Government largely skipped celebrating Tajikistan's sixteenth anniversary of independence on September 9; there were a few posters noting the anniversary, but no large ceremonies or other events. On November 16 we saw why; the anniversary of the real start of Tajikistan's national life.

13. (C) The President went to Khujand for the 15th anniversary of the 16th Session of the Supreme Soviet of Tajikistan, which elected him chairman. The 1992 meeting of the Supreme Soviet was held in the northern city since it could not convene safely in the capital which was partially occupied by rebel forces. The full diplomatic corps along with most members of parliament and high government officials received invitations to participate in the 15th anniversary in Khujand, where the streets were lined with posters of Rahmon and slogans reading "fifteen years of the new Tajikistan" -- a clear indication that Tajikistan's modern history begins with Rahmon's accession to power, not with independence.

14. (C) The Arbob Palace in Khujand was the venue for the main celebrations. It brought together symbols from several eras. The palace is a reproduction of a tsarist palace in Saint Petersburg, the Petrodvorets, and is located on one of the largest collective farms in Leninabad (now Khujand) where, fifteen years ago, the Supreme Soviet (still called that a year after independence) selected Rahmon as their chairman -- "a decision which history has proven to be correct," according to multiple speakers at the anniversary celebration.

15. (C) Rahmon entered the historic chamber to martial music, a standing audience clapping in unison, and a disembodied voice

announcing the arrival of his Excellency. His hour long speech was carried live on Tajik television. Following it were ninety minutes of Tajik officials and citizens praising the president, and another hour of patriotic music and dance. There was also a short film encapsulating Tajikistan's history, depicting the ancient King Somoni, followed by pictures of the civil war, and then a bemedalled Rahmon entering to make peace, embracing various bearded leaders of the opposition. The film concluded with footage showing Tajikistan's prosperity -- dams, electric transmission lines and cotton harvests. Some of the observers at the ceremonies did not miss the irony: the 2007 cotton harvest was 25 percent below target, Tajikistan's big dam projects are badly behind schedule, and Khujand is one of many cities in Tajikistan already rationing electricity for the winter.

Soccer Match Shenanigans =====

¶6. (C) Two days later, EmbOffs attended the Tajikistan-Singapore World Cup qualifying match at the central stadium in Dushanbe. (Tajikistan lost on aggregate.) The atmosphere was dramatically different than prior World Cup qualifying matches because President Rahmon attended.

¶7. (C) At an earlier match, against Bangladesh in October, ticket prices were 5 somoni. MOI officers were very strict about letting in only people with tickets. The stadium looked like it was pretty run down, and it was at best half-full. The crowd was not particularly animated, and there were about 100 security officers present. The match was not well-publicized. Tajikistan won, 5-0 (and advanced 6-1 on aggregate). Rahmon did not attend.

¶8. (C) However, for the November 18 match, authorities admitted all comers free of charge. The stadium was packed - the

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announced attendance was over 20,000, and it was standing room only. Emboffs missed the beginning of the game, but Rahmon attended and sat in the stadium's presidential box. The stadium had clearly been spruced up - large banners covered the very dated and worn structures on the side of the stadium opposite the presidential box. EmbOffs estimated that one third of the audience crowd were members of the security services, all in uniform, and occupying the first 15 or so rows around the entire stadium, forming a ring of uniformed security personnel. It was clear that they were not there simply for security -- they were leading the cheers and performed "the wave." A military band was there to simulate the festive mood that one usually observes at a European or Latin American soccer match. Security service officers were observed specifically ordering the cheers and the wave, coordinating their actions by radio. The enthusiasm of the civilian soccer fans did not quite match that of the uniformed personnel (although PolOff took the time to teach two young Tajiks how to do the wave). A representative from the government's Committee for Sports, Youth, and Tourism told us that sporting events are usually free when the President attends, and that the President had "invited" many people, including the military.

Comment - Kidding Himself =====

¶9. (C) We see no sign that Rahmon's grip on power is slipping, yet his nascent cult of personality pales in comparison to that of some of his neighbors. However, the comical self-aggrandizing of his recent celebrations as the country heads into another difficult winter of electricity shortages and high inflation, along with the steady dismantling of the regional power sharing arrangements which helped end the civil war, suggest Rahmon is increasingly isolated and unaware of the shortcomings of his regime. End Comment.
HUSHEK